



# First Helpings

## AT THE PLEASURE OF THE SFA

**I**N THE TWELVE WEEKS OF MY maternity leave this past winter, I watched all 156 episodes of *The West Wing*. I wrote freakishly prompt thank-you notes. I did laundry like it was going out of style. Reader, I ironed—more than once. Oh, and I spent hours at a time snuggling the cutest, most perfect baby girl in the world (I say that with complete objectivity, of course). *I could get used to this life*, I thought.



Sally at the office

After those twelve weeks, beginning a brand-new relationship with a brand-new person, I wasn't sure if I'd be ready to come back to work. More accurately, I flat-out didn't feel ready to come back. But I'd run through my maternity leave—and all seven seasons of *The West Wing*. Meanwhile, Osayi had pushed ahead with this issue of *Gravy*, serving as guest editor. And after a few more weeks, I realized, with equal parts surprise and delight, that I was happy to be back.

I talked to SFA managing director, mother of two, and fellow *West Wing* aficionado Melissa Hall about all of this. At its core, I proposed, wasn't *The West Wing* a show about teamwork? Did that explain its appeal? "It's more than that," Melissa said. "It's the best of what it feels like to work in a highly functional office. And you're realizing you missed that sense of common enterprise, whether it's potting 300 olive-tree saplings for the 2011 Symposium, or watching Richie work his design magic with a feature layout." Sam, Toby, CJ, and Josh can have the State of the Union. I'll keep *Gravy*. —Sara Camp Milam

### FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR

## JOHN KESSLER



cultural truths. If they're delivered with a gimlet eye and a sense of humor, all the better. In short, that's John Kessler.

#### What does it mean to "read" a restaurant?

I may sound like a comp lit major who has just discovered Foucault, but everything is a text. Restaurants are particularly rich texts, now more than ever as they've become such a significant part of life.

#### What can we learn from such a reading? What are the larger cultural questions?

Diners look for so much in restaurants today, beyond the contact high of good food and alcohol. Likewise, critics should move beyond thumbs up/thumbs down and explore what restaurants say about who we are, what we want, and where we live.

#### Halfway into this series, has your thinking about the role of the chef or the restaurant space changed?

For sure. Back to the comp lit (sorry!), but I think a chef's authorship is always a function of a larger discourse. I have definitely rethought the restaurant space. While I used to use theater as a metaphor, now I find it outdated. Diners today look for something both more profane and more sacred in a dining experience—part bawdy cabaret and part Quaker meeting house.

WHEN LONGTIME SFA MEMBER AND former *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* restaurant critic **JOHN KESSLER** conceived of a *Gravy* series, he led with this: "Traditional restaurant criticism is mostly dead, with a few exceptions." He had our attention. The way we talk about dining has changed, Kessler argued. Today, some dining sections are more likely to laud hot new restaurants than to offer incisive commentary or reconsider stalwarts. *Gravy* readers know that we're not in the business of restaurant reviews. We are in the business of sharp, thoughtful analysis, and of stories that examine specific places and people to reveal broader

Photo courtesy of John Kessler